

GARDEN SOIL

USE OF THE COMPOST HEAP

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

To those who remember the time when Londoners had to pay for the removal of horse manure from their stables, it may seem absurd that it should now be precious beyond the reach of most gardeners. Broadly, it is still the best of all manures because it combines plant food and humus, while the straw helps to keep the earth open to the air. Alternatively there is now the compost heap, a modern invention in which, mainly by the release of nitrogen, appropriate chemicals assist the growth of the micro-organisms that hasten decomposition.

Decayed vegetable matter called humus is invaluable for retaining moisture in the soil and improving its mechanical texture, but more than that is needed to make the soil fertile. The common heap of tree and shrub leaves, withered plants, and garden sweepings generally is the most familiar form of humus; and all gardeners can make it for themselves. Except for the labour of gathering the material together, it costs nothing, yet in the pursuit of tidiness, especially in small gardens, it is too often neglected in favour of an incinerator or a bonfire. It is true that the ash from the fire is rich in invaluable potash salts, easily spread over the ground and forked in; but all too often these are left till the first shower of rain dissolves them out, leaving the ash more or less valueless.

There should be room in the smallest of gardens for a compost heap, and though this usually takes the form of a shallow pit or simple open-ended enclosure walled with brick, concrete, or old creosoted railway sleepers, it can be made on the flat. On to this all kinds of vegetable refuse and even kitchen peelings and refuse should go, but no hard-wooded material like shrub or tree twigs or branches, as they do not readily dissolve. Potato and pea haulms, cabbage and sprouts stalks, bearded iris leaves, peony stalks, tulip and daffodil leaves, spent tomato plants, grass mowings, weeds, and all the other flotsam and jetsam of kitchen and flower garden should be piled in layers of about 1ft. at a time.

Heating and decay begin at once, and, to hasten the last, the micro-organisms already referred to should be encouraged by the addition of nitrogen, which is furnished by nitro-chalk, Adco, sulphate of ammonia, or calcium cyanamide. These can all be had from garden sundriesmen, and one or the other should be sprinkled over each layer of a foot as it is added to the heap.

Though the heap will soon begin to settle and dwindle, some months must elapse before it is cool and ready for use. When it is thoroughly rotted it may be laid over the ground and dug in, just as stable manure is dug in; and to help in the production of food the vegetable plot should have first call on the compost heap. A beginning with the heap should be made at once so that it may be ready for the early spring.

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FROM A CORRESPONDENT.

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